

Questioning the ‘witch’ label: women as evil in ancient Rome

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Introduction

It became popular during the early Roman Empire for authors to depict women using magic in their writing. Such women appeared in almost every literary genre (satire, love poetry, epic and novels) during a span of 150 years. They can be found in the works of Virgil, Horace, Tibullus, Propertius, Ovid, Lucan, Petronius and Apuleius. They were not a particularly coherent group, although they share certain common characteristics. Besides their link with magic there is only one other thing that they all share in common – these women are called witches by scholars today regardless of the Latin terminology used to refer to them.¹

What these scholars mean when they use the term ‘witch’ is difficult to know as this English word, which has associations with modern European history, is never explained. This paper seeks to question the validity of using this modern term in the context of an ancient society, in this case Rome. First of all, what do scholars mean by ‘witch’ today and what ideas lie behind this term. Second, what similarities exist between the witches of the late Middle Ages and women using sorcery in Latin literature? As the topic is broad, this paper will focus specifically on the crimes of these women. Finally, who in Roman society were connected with particularly evil or unnatural crimes such as baby killing or cannibalism? Was it magic practitioners or others in society?

Part one: witches and their crimes

First found in a ninth century manuscript, the term ‘witch’ is thought to derive from the old English word *wicca*, meaning someone who casts a spell.² It is likely, however, that our understanding of the term today is influenced from the period known as the witch-hunts which affected most of Europe in the late Middle Ages and resulted in the deaths of many thousands of people. At this time two ideas became attached to this term. Not only was the term used almost exclusively in the feminine, but also it came to signify ‘evil’ and ‘secret society’.³

It is very difficult to distinguish between the terms ‘witch’ and ‘sorceress’ not least because many people using sorcery became accused of being witches.⁴ In this paper, the terms will be defined as follows. A sorceress, like a sorcerer, is a person who uses sorcery.⁵ The term sorceress defines a person according to an activity, but does not imply any moral judgement – the term alone denotes neither good nor evil. This is not true of the term ‘witch’ as it cannot easily be separated from the idea of evil.⁶ In 1484, those using witchcraft were designated enemies of society and this idea persisted until the witch-hunts died out in the 1700s.

Both the ideas of ‘evil’ and ‘secret society’ can be seen in the crimes allegedly committed by witches. The Church perceived witchcraft as the ultimate in human evil.⁷ In essence, therefore, witches could be accused of virtually any crime. In Scotland and England, one of the main crimes was maleficium which one scholar describes it as causing harm through hatred or through the manipulation of objects or incantations.⁸ This harm could be directed towards a person, their family or their

livelihood. Maleficium was blamed for sudden deaths or unexplained illness. In some areas of Scotland where accusation was rife among the wives of tenant farmers, it included the drying up of milk in livestock or crop failure. In fishing villages, it helped explain disasters at sea.⁹

Witch prosecutors on the Continent tended to favour heresy as the main threat of the witch – the idea that witches swore allegiance to the devil. This allegedly took place at a nocturnal ceremony called the sabbat. As this ceremony was pure fabrication, any number of heinous crimes could be said to have been committed there. On the Continent, the main activities believed to be practised at these meetings included the sacrifice of children, cannibalism, orgies and forms of Devil worship, but these rarely featured in Scottish witch accusations.¹⁰ In Scotland the pact with the devil was the most important element and the meetings themselves were described more like social gatherings.¹¹ All of this was embroidered with fantastic details. For instance, it was believed that the fat of murdered children was used as a salve for witches to help them leave their homes unnoticed.¹² And broomsticks, that domestic implement used by all women of this age, became an important form of transport for witches.

One interesting feature of the sabbat was that it was a secret meeting of witches. This belief in a secret society justified the use of torture because in theory a convicted witch should be able to name other witches seen at this nocturnal and secret event. It has been argued that the use of torture in Scotland and on the Continent contributed significantly to the overall size and importance of this event.¹³ In England, where torture was officially banned, methods such as starvation and sleep deprivation were used instead to the same effect.¹⁴

Of course anthropologists today use the term witch also in the context of pre-industrial societies. Despite different time periods and geographical locations, witch myths in many of these diverse cultures share a number of similar witch beliefs. For instance, witches are always attributed with values that negate the values of 'normal' society as a whole.¹⁵ So it was common to attach to witches immoral and unnatural crimes such as incest, bestiality, cannibalism. And in this sense the European witch-hunts were no different from other persecutions of witches in other cultures. In the first general ban on witchcraft issued by Pope Innocent VIII in 1484 the crimes and offences of these enemies of the people are recorded. According to the Pope their activities included the killing of babies, causing barrenness in women and impotence in men, attacking the livelihood of people such as the destruction of the crops or the killing of livestock.¹⁶

Part two: women as witches in Latin literature

So using the term 'witch' in a translation of these Latin texts could imply that similar beliefs existed in ancient Rome as in the late Middle ages. When the term witch is used in Latin literature, does it mean that these women were perceived as evil or that they were believed to congregate secretly for the purpose of committing crimes against society? In fact, this is not a particularly accurate description of Latin literary sorceresses. The majority of these fifteen women were comic figures who made love potions. Many of them were based loosely on the popular stereotype of the old woman in Greek comedy, such as the plays of Aristophanes. Like this Greek stock figure, sorceresses tended to be old, lusty, drunk and aggressive.¹⁷ Sorcery was added

by Latin authors for a further comic twist. They were entertaining and not threatening. There were, however, two exceptions and they are probably the most evil women in Latin literature.

One of these two women is named Ericho and she can be found in book 6 of Lucan's epic entitled *Pharsalia*. She is described by one scholar as "a living caricature of wickedness".¹⁸ Unlike other Latin literary sorceresses who use magic in order to attain money, sex or power, Ericho commits evil for the sake of it and she does so with enthusiasm and delight. Lucan describes her as willing to commit any crime without hesitation, but only two of them will be mentioned here. First of all, she sacrifices babies and children to the gods. In one reference she reminds the gods that she has never hesitated to murder a child in order to give them the entrails.¹⁹ In another she tore the foetus from the womb of a pregnant woman in order to make an offering.²⁰

Second, she is attributed with possessing inherent powers which is not a common theme in the portrayal of Latin literary sorceresses. All sorceresses in Lucan's work have these powers. For example, they are described as being more poisonous than snakes.²¹ Ericho is able to destroy the crops in a field just by walking over it.²² Crop destruction occurs in two earlier works where the sorceress used her magical powers to move crops from one field to another.²³ This act appears as a crime in the earliest legal source for Rome called the Twelve Tables. Written in 5th century BC, the law reads: "Neither should you entice another's crop".²⁴ It is a possible complaint that might arise when one person's crops fail, while the crops in the neighbouring field can be harvested. The law is hardly surprising given that throughout Roman history, even later in the Principate, the economy was heavily based on agriculture. Interestingly, these criminal activities of Ericho are similar to the crimes attributed to the later witch. And this is perhaps the reason why a scholar describes her as "the first recognisably modern witch".²⁵

The second woman, is also a child murderer but overall a less harrowing figure than Ericho. Horace portrayed a woman named Canidia in several of his works. Like other literary sorceresses she makes love spells – unlike them she uses the body parts of children as ingredients. In the fifth *Epode*, she along with three other women kidnaps and murders a young boy in order to use his bone marrow in an erotic spell. Horace cleverly taps into one of the most common fears shared by parents in all time periods and societies - that for the well-being of their children. The subject of kidnapping continues to feature in popular entertainment today (i.e. on TV or in the cinema) for the same reason. One surviving inscription suggests that kidnapping did take place in ancient Rome. It reads: "While I was going into my fourth year I was stolen, when I could have been sweet to my mother and father a disreputable (or magical) hand stole me away, a hand which is cruel wherever it remains on (earth) the land and harms by its art, parents guard your children lest grief becomes fixed in your heart."²⁶

Her crime as well as her person, in comparison with Lucan's monster, seem tame. Yet here it is the motive of her crime that is important to understanding how a Roman audience would have reacted to this poem. Canidia, who is described as an indecent old hag, sacrifices the life of a young boy in order to lure back her lover – a worthless young man named Varus.²⁷ In Greece and Rome, it was believed that sexuality in the

aged was considered ridiculous, disgusting and unnatural.²⁸ This theme is handled in two other of Horace's poems where he describes the effects of old age on the genitalia of old women in detail.²⁹ Coupled with that, their lust as so strong that they are willing to perform indecent sexual acts to satisfy it.³⁰ Already killing a child for a magic spell is a terrible crime, but to do so to fuel the lust of an old woman is downright shocking.

In addition, there are four women using magic together in this poem. Usually in Latin literature, the woman performs a magic rite alone (as is the case of Ovid's Dispas) or aided by an assistant who is often her slave (as in Virgil's 8th *Eclogue*). Lucan's text takes place in Thessaly which the Romans believed was full of sorceresses, Erichtho worked entirely alone. The relationship between the four women in Epode 5 is never clarified. For instance was Canidia the mistress and the other three women her slaves?³¹ Or were they all just friends? This is the only example from ancient Rome from both in literary and non-literary sources of four women using magic to commit a crime together, which makes it even more difficult to comment on.³² But it does provoke an interesting question – is this poem more threatening for the use of four women rather than one? It is probably the case.

Part three: women as evil in Roman society

A scholar commenting on Horace's Canidia has suggested that Romans feared the existence of evil women like her in society, thereby suggesting that she mirrored an actual threat.³³ This being the case, we can expect to find in non-literary texts the repetition of this fear, as was the case in later Europe where hundreds of books became available to fuel and advertise the existence of this evil. Can we find women like Canidia and Erichtho in the non-literary sources? In fact, it is very difficult to find evidence for the idea that women might have been feared or perceived as threats in surviving sources. Having said that, ancient historians recorded two separate incidents which bear a superficial resemblance to the later witch-hunts.

In the first example, the historian Ammianus Marcellinus writes that an old woman who was summoned to cure the daughter of a prominent man was put to death by the Emperor for using incantations (*carmina*).³⁴ This incident took place in the fourth century AD so three hundred years after the literary examples in a different social and political setting. This is the only information supplied about this incident, so it is difficult to know if the death was the result of incompetence or if it was an intentional act of evil. It is worth noting that this historian makes a couple of statements that speaks of magic as an activity particularly associated with old women. According to him, Constantius in the year AD 356-7 inflicted death on anyone caught using an old wives' charm to relieve pain, even though such methods were considered acceptable by medical authority.³⁵ The fate of death is also recorded under Emperors Valentinianus, Valens, and Gratianus in AD 371-2 for use of similar charms of old women.³⁶

It resembles the witch-hunts in that many people who claimed to cure or use spells got caught up in accusations and were persecuted as witches.³⁷ Also the stereotype of a witch was specifically that of an old woman. Yet it is the only such example surviving from antiquity. There is no shortage of women punished for committing crimes in ancient history books – but the crimes were usually treason and adultery

(often one in the same). There are a further 4 cases where use of magic or consultation of magicians was added to these other two crimes. They all take place in the early years of the Empire and involve women from the noblest Roman families – Claudia Pulcher, Lollia Paulina, Domitia Lepida and Servilia who was the daughter of Marcus Boreas Soranus.³⁸ Here magic is just an additional charge to ensure the elimination of an unwanted rival and these women were not considered a threat to society as a whole. These women were portrayed as a threat either to the life of the Emperor or the Augusta, but in reality were unwanted rivals among powerful noble families.

The second example comes from the early history of Rome and is recorded by Livy. In 331 BC many people died in Rome and initially it was thought that plague was the main cause.³⁹ Then a number of prominent citizens died and it came to be treated as a murder inquiry. A slave woman came forward and reported that the deaths were caused by evil women making poisons. Twenty women from noble families were rounded up and taken to the forum where they were forced to drink the medicines. They all died. This caused a scare and around 170 women were found guilty and condemned. The text seems to suggest that women worked together to commit evil, but it doesn't lend itself easily to this interpretation. First, as with the previous example, this is the only case of its kind in ancient Rome. Second, Livy wrote hundreds of years after the event and he doubted the authenticity of his sources.⁴⁰ It is more likely to be yet another story about power struggles, like a similar story told by Livy and which became distorted over time.⁴¹

Part four: enemies of the Roman people

So in one sense using the term witch in the context of antiquity is problematic. In literature, only 2 out of 15 sorceresses have some similarity to the later idea of a witch. And there is little concrete information to suggest that the Romans considered women generally as enemies or threats to the social order. Which leaves the question, who were associated with these types of crimes in Rome as a way of designating them an enemy of society? There is not one answer to that question, but there are a number of different individuals linked to crimes such as child sacrifice, cannibalism and incest.

In some cases these accusations were used against those who tried to seize power or topple the government. One of these is Catiline who was the governor of Africa in 67 BC. He was an impoverished patrician who was as dissolute as he was poor. In 65 BC he plotted a revolution which failed. The historians recording this event, associated him with a number of indecent crimes. One historian claims that he sacrificed a boy and ate his flesh in the company of others.⁴² Another claims that he was in the habit of drinking human blood.⁴³ And a third attributes him with fratricide and incest with his own daughter.⁴⁴ Under Tiberius, Sejanus came close to stealing the Empire out from under his nose. Tacitus describes him as the 'author of every crime' yet no specifics are given.⁴⁵ Agrippina, the mother of emperor Nero was criticized for being power-hungry and trying to rule the Empire through her son. The list of her crimes includes her willingness to commit incest with her son, which crime is referred to as a monstrosity.⁴⁶ Ancient history texts are full of stories about those who tried to seize power or topple the government. In the late Republic and early Empire, treason laws and trials were the main method used for eliminating such enemies.

Other targets for these types of accusations include philosophers and orators. The philosopher Apollonius of Tyana was charged with various crimes and it was believed that he performed a rite of divination which involved cutting up a boy at night under a waning moon.⁴⁷ Cicero is able to assassinate the character of a senator in court by implying that this man sacrifices boys in order to divine the future from their entrails. This accusation is based on the fact that this senator was known to be a Pythagorean.⁴⁸ The same charge was lodged against the orator Libanius. He was not only the victim of a magic curse, but he faced the allegations that he had cut off the heads off of two girls to be used in magic against Caesar Gallus and his senior colleague.⁴⁹

We might expect any discussion of enemies of society to include magicians. Pliny the Elder was one of the fiercest critics of men called the *magi*. They come across in his work as frauds, charlatans and liars.⁵⁰ In book 28, he accuses Osthanes, a Persian *magus* who lived in the 5th century BC of encouraging people to drink human blood and using parts of corpses of men who died violently in magic rites.⁵¹

Philosophers and magicians were both sections of society that came under frequent attack in the late Republic and early Empire. But this picture provides a few key differences with the later witch-hunts. First of all, most of these accusations are linked to men. Second the persecution was not by inquisition nor was it systematic. For instance, individual magicians were often banished or executed throughout Roman history. But on the whole, the Romans were tolerant of magic or what one scholar terms 'unsanctioned religious activities'. In fact it was only repressed in particular circumstances and on an individual basis.⁵² The same can be said of philosophers.⁵³

Another difference can be seen in Roman beliefs surrounding crop destruction. In history texts crops are not destroyed by human agents but by the gods as a sign of divine displeasure. According to Tacitus, the Emperor Nero not only sneaked out of the imperial residence at night to commit crimes but also encouraged the immorality that was rife in Rome at this time. He relates several disasters that afflicted Italy at this time such as a hurricane which destroyed orchards and crops in Campania while Rome was ravaged by the plague.⁵⁴ This was interpreted as a sign that the gods were angry with the Roman people. The sorceress Erichtho's destruction of crops fits can also be understood in this way. Lucan's fictive world was not populated and controlled by the usual pantheon of gods, but by strange and nameless powers. Erichtho was one embodiment of these powers which was both evil and destructive.⁵⁵

Conclusion

So it seems that based on this one criterion – crime – that it is possible to say that the term 'witch' is misleading when used in the context of Latin literature or Roman society. It is true that some literary characters are witch-like but the moral and cultural baggage that goes along with the term 'witch' is not present in Roman society. The real problem does not stem from a lack of understanding of this ancient culture, but perhaps the idea that we are not even aware that this baggage exists. The witch-hunts were a unique political event that upset the whole of Europe for several hundreds of years and we still feel the repercussions today. This is obvious in the way we use the term 'witch'.

According to the ancient historian Livy, plagues were caused by the anger of the gods.⁵⁶ It was considered one form of divine punishment inflicted on humans who act immorally or who do not pay proper respect to the gods. Right through Roman history many attacks of the plague are recorded along with the expiations that were sanctioned by official priests. And yet there are only a handful of references to unnatural crimes like baby killing in ancient texts. All of which begs the question – were the Romans more afraid of their gods than evil people in their midst?

¹ Latin terms include *anus, femina, maga, mulier, nutrix, saga, sacerdos, Thessala*.

² JB Russell, *A History of Witchcraft*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1980, pp.12-14.

³ C Larner on witch hunting as woman hunting, see *Witchcraft and Religion*, Basil Blackwell, London, 1984, pp.84-88.

⁴ K Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Weidenfield and Nicholson, London, 1971, p.209-251.

⁵ J B Sykes (ed.), *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, Oxford University Press, 1983, s.v., sorceress.

⁶ There is no fixed way of defining these terms and many follow Evans-Pritchard's distinction that witchcraft is a supernatural manifestation of malice, whereas sorcery was an intentional act that required specific actions, see EE Evans-Pritchard, *Sorcellerie, oracles et magie, chez les Azandé*, Editions Gallimard, Paris, 1972.

⁷ C Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion*, pp.85-6.

⁸ *ibid*, p.80.

⁹ *ibid*, p.74.

¹⁰ C Larner, *Enemies of God*, John Donald, Edinburgh, 2000, p.151.

¹¹ As Larner points out, all social events were very much frowned on at that time in Scotland, see *Witchcraft and Religion*, p.76.

¹² HR Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1967, p.15.

¹³ *ibid*, pp.44-5.

¹⁴ K Thomas, *op.cit.*, p.617.

¹⁵ P Mayer, 'Witches', *Witchcraft and Sorcery*, M Marwick (ed.), Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, 1970, p.60.

¹⁶ M Summers, *The Malleus Maleficarum of Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger*, Dover Publications Inc., New York, 1971, pp.29-32.

¹⁷ J Henderson, 'Older Women in Attic Old Comedy', *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, vol.117, 1987, pp.118-120.

¹⁸ WR Johnson, *Momentary Monsters: Lucan and his heroes*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1987, p.20.

¹⁹ *Pharsalia*, 6.710-11

²⁰ *ibid*, 6.558-9

²¹ *ibid*, 6.491

²² *ibid*, 6.521-2

²³ Virgil, *Eclogue* 8.99 and Tibullus 1.8.19

²⁴ *neve alienam segetem pellexeris*.

²⁵ Johnson, *op.cit.*, p.19.

²⁶ *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinorum*, VI.19747

²⁷ *Epode*, 5.73

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- ²⁸ TG Parkin, *Old Age in the Roman World*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 203, p.200.
- ²⁹ *Epodes* 8 and 12.
- ³⁰ A Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1983, pp.109-116.
- ³¹ S Eitrem, "La magie comme motif littéraire chez les Grecs et les Romains" in *Symbolae Osloenses*, vol. 21, 1941, p.64 thinks that Sagana is the slave of Canidia in *Satire* 1.8.
- ³² A stucco panel in an underground basilica at Porta Maggiore, Rome is believed to depict two men and two women using magic together, see M Beard, J North and S Price, *Religions of Rome Volume 1: A History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, pp.273-4.
- ³³ CE Manning, "Canidia in the Epodes of Horace" in *Mnemosyne*, vol.23, 1970, p.394.
- ³⁴ 29.2.26-7.
- ³⁵ *ibid*, 16.8.1.
- ³⁶ 29.2.3.
- ³⁷ For example, some scholars claim that midwives were accused because they were an obstacle to the budding field of medicine, see B Ehrenreich and D English, *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A Story of Women Healers*. Feminist Press, New York, 1973, p.15.
- ³⁸ Tacitus, *Annals*, 4.52, 12.22, 12.65 and 16.30.
- ³⁹ 8.18.
- ⁴⁰ 8.18.2.
- ⁴¹ 40.36.13.37
- ⁴² Dio, *Roman History*, 37.30.3.
- ⁴³ Sallust, *Catiline*, 22.1-2.
- ⁴⁴ Cicero, *In Catilinam*, 10.3.
- ⁴⁵ *Annals*, 4.9.
- ⁴⁶ Tacitus, *Annals*, 13.57.
- ⁴⁷ Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, 7.20.
- ⁴⁸ *In Vatinium* 14.
- ⁴⁹ . *Orations*, 1.98.
- ⁵⁰ L Thorndike suggests that Pliny disliked the *magi* for intellectual reasons more than moral reasons, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, MacMillan and Co. Ltd., London, 1923, p.62.
- ⁵¹ *Natural History*, 28.6.
- ⁵² C R Phillips III, 'Nullum Crimen Sine Lege: Socioreligious Sanctions on Magic' in *Magika Hiera*, C A Faraone and D Obbink (eds), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991, p.261.
- ⁵³ R MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order*, Routledge, London, 1992, pp.46-94.
- ⁵⁴ *Annals*, 13.57.
- ⁵⁵ Johnson, *op.cit.*, p.18.
- ⁵⁶ 3.6.